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Attention to Detail – Creating a World Class Show Garden

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Creating a World-Class Show Garden

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What started out as a complimentary invitation from the Cleveland Botanical Garden Center (C.B.G.C.) quickly evolved into an intriguing challenge. Wayne Impolliti, president of Impolliti Landscaping, agreed to be one of only six companies (five from the Greater Cleveland area and one from London) to take part in C.B.G.C.'s first outdoor flower show. "Many people were hesitant to commit to being part of this new show due to it being unique and innovative, however I quickly decided that I didn't want to be sitting at home and watching the show on television without being a part of it, and wishing I had," said Wayne. The show's debut took place in the spring of 2000 and is the only outdoor flower show in the United States honored with major show status by the National Council of State Garden Clubs and the Garden Club of America. It is only rivaled by The Royal Horticulture Society's Chelsea Flower Show.

Due to the show being a premier event unlike any other flower show, there were many challenges and concerns, which were discussed upon the initial invitation. In contrast to most garden shows where the exhibits are dismantled at the conclusion of the show, these gardens would remain for a period of two years at which time they would be redone for the bi-annual event. Leaving the gardens in place for two years allowed visitors to pay additional visits to the grounds to experience the gardens as they evolve throughout the seasons and mature with time. Due to the show being semi-permanent and outdoors, it quickly became apparent that this garden would have to be designed, built and implemented as if it were being installed as an actual project, compared to a temporary show garden in which many of the components are mocked up to visually replicate a real landscape. Another complication arose due to the timing of the show, which ran from June 1 to June 4, 2000. Most of the labor—in excess of 2,000 man
hours—was done during May which is typically one of our busiest installation months, due in part to Northeast Ohio’s cold and snowy winters.

The Site Challenge

Six parcels of real estate on the C.B.G.C. grounds were chosen as designations for the Living Exhibits. Each company was assigned a plot via a lottery system—this way no one felt slighted, as each spot was unique from any other. Upon the initial examination of our site, we quickly realized that we were now faced with a whole new set of design and logistics challenges.

The shape of the lot was very long and narrow with a dogleg bend, which created an extended peninsula area. Approximately 70 percent of the garden was encompassed by a 10 foot wide gravel pedestrian walkway. This meant that the garden would be viewed from numerous angles. The existing site had a natural grade change of 10 foot in a relatively short run of about 50 feet. Situated at the top of our site was an ornamental iron fence, a pedestrian walk and a busy thoroughfare complete with noisy cars and buses, a myriad of urban jungle elements all in plain view and within ear shot of our garden. In addition, our site was nestled in the middle of the other gardens. While we felt strongly that our display should be distinctive and a good representation of Impulliti Landscaping, it also would be necessary for our display to integrate with neighboring gardens. The gardens would have to withstand the elements for two years, project the image and caliber of a Chelsea Flower Show, perform functionally and aesthetically for 40,000 plus show attendees in four days, and endure the scrutiny of international show judges.

Uniting Form and Function

With many of the parameters now in place, it was time to initiate the design process. I believe that a good design is based upon three criteria: 1) the requests and wishes of the client; 2) the site conditions; (a thorough site analysis will divulge a plethora of information in regards to what will or will not work with a given site and automatically set boundaries before pencil hits paper) and 3) the designer’s experience, ideas and enthusiasm.

Frank Lloyd Wright used the word organic to describe his architecture in 1894 when he stated, "Let your home appear to grow easily from its site and shape it to sympathize with the surroundings." He defined organic architecture as "architecture that is appropriate to time, appropriate to place and appropriate to man." By appropriate to time he meant a building should belong to the era in which it was created. He depicted a building as being appropriate to place if it is in harmony with it’s natural
The garden, filled with plants like Japanese painted ferns and pastel begonias, was designed for the first outdoor Cleveland Botanical Garden Flower Show and remains for two years. The site is very long and narrow, dropping 10.5 feet for a 40 foot-long section.

environment, with the landscape, wherever possible taking best advantage of natural features. By appropriate to man, he meant that a building’s first mission is to serve people. He subscribed to the concept that the reality of the building is the space within to be lived, not the walls and the ceilings.

These philosophies can easily be applied to landscape design and architecture. Most designers and architects are familiar with the phrase; form follows function, or one of the many regurgitated forms of this theory. I think Wright said it best when he stated, “Form follows functions—that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.”

Setting the Stage

A show garden serves a multitude of functions. One purpose is to educate the public, as this has been and still is an ongoing goal of the horticulture industry. It also presented the perfect opportunity for professionals in the green industry to demonstrate good landscape practices, to explain the many benefits landscaping offers to potential clients and to describe the design/build process. Like theater, a show garden provides a stage upon which to display new materials, plants, and techniques, or to reintroduce some from times gone by. In addition, due to the nature of the event, the audience expects to be intrigued and
entertained. Today's society tires quickly of the mundane and the ordinary. At a prestigious flower show, sophisticated audiences want to be "wowed" by the unique or above average exhibits. As a show participant, we must also factor into the mix the obvious potential to utilize the event as a selling and marketing tool by displaying a little sampling of each of the many services that we provide. This is only possible when all of the elements compliment each other and work well together.

Defining Individual Spaces

During the show, we strived to get the audience to pause and interact from within our space and take in all the garden had to offer both physically and spiritually—as opposed to simply viewing the garden. To understand a complex or multi-faceted project, it must first be dissected and broken down into its most simplest elements. This is accomplished by defining the individual spaces with a series of elements. The three main elements or building blocks of this garden are the floors (brick and sandstone), the walls (plant materials, boulders, quarried sandstone, wood), and the ceiling (plant materials, wood). Landscaping in its purest form can be described as the creation of outdoor rooms, hence the use of floors, walls and ceilings. Fire and water, two more components of the garden serve as focal points or furnishings of the room.

After the initial lining out and shooting of grades work began on the floors of the garden. Following extensive excavation down to virgin subsoil, compaction of base material and leveling, the floors were laid utilizing medium ironspot clay brick and reclaimed sidewalks sandstone. The ironspot brick has a dense, almost shiny texture giving them a rich look of elegance. The bricks were laid in a running bond pattern in the walkway to signify direction, while circular rowlocks in the transition area and a diagonal herringbone pattern under the arbor add a touch of formality to a somewhat rustic environment. The sandstone was laid in a broken-glass pattern throughout the design to provide some repetition and unity through the landscape. The sandstone also matches the sixth-inch sandstone used in walls and as steps. The broken-glass sandstone pattern possesses a timeless standard of quality in design. The stone was laid in a very tight pattern with small joints. Each side of each piece of stone was hand-chiseled to conform closely to the pieces 360 degrees around it.

Ken Pachas, crew leader in charge of the garden installation said, "It's like creating a large jigsaw puzzle. Too many times people attempt to do broken-glass by simply laying random sizes and shapes of stone next to each other often resulting in a haphazard pattern." Unique patterns were created in certain areas by mixing the brick and stone together. This should be done judiciously so as to create a visually captivating appearance but not cluttered or gimmicky. When mixing patterns or materials, a transition area will soften the change. This can be as simple as a rowlock between the elements. Circular design patterns in the brick and stone are repeated in different areas emulating other circular design elements.

The walls of our outdoor rooms consist of several elements. Some of the walls are actually living materials such as evergreen conifers, trees, and shrubs. These not only define space but also serve as screen, separation, enclosure, noise reduction, and a way to stop the eye from viewing elements outside of the garden. Large earthen-tone sandstone boulders were utilized to tame the severe natural grade changes of the plot. These walls also serve to
The water feature (above) begins with a 2.5-foot-deep, half-circle shaped pool. Water from the pool is then pumped through a series of valves (one for each head) that control the water output of five heads. Two-inch holes had to be bored through the stones to allow the heads to project water back into the pool. Facing page: A pair of twin alcove areas built off each side of the main terrace house circular benches built into the arbor. The benches reflect the shape of the stone walls behind them. Approximately 70 percent of the garden was encompassed by a 10 foot wide gravel pedestrian walkway. This meant that the garden would be viewed from numerous angles.

terrace off individual sections of the garden further adding to the feeling of separate rooms. This one element—more so than any other—was used throughout the entire garden providing a strong sense of interconnection. Again, care needs to be taken when placing these features to achieve a natural look. The character of each stone is studied and a face is selected to be the side viewed. The rocks are partially buried, fitted to one another, and used to create outcroppings to provide a look of age and stability, echoing a time long forgotten. Often times a particularly large stone will be set where it engorges on a walk or hardscape surface, that way it looks as if the rock was already there and the walk or patio was built around it. The rocks can be softened with living elements such as plants, water, and the rays of the sun or shadows.

Another type of wall in the garden is constructed of six-inch-thick reclaimed-sandstone curbstones, foundation barnstone and a variety of 2 to 4 inch sandstone. This wall lines the perimeter of the space enclosed by the arbor. It serves as retention, backdrop, and enclosure. This element of the garden really showcases the old world talents of the artists and craftsmen at Impollini Landscaping. With all of the pseudo-stone products available today, we take a lot of pride in the fact that we have people on staff who possess the desire and talent to work with natural stone in ways that our ancestors were accustomed to. The walls traverse the landscape in 90-degree angles and half circles. Each piece of stone had to be individually cut to size with diamond blades—some on precise angles to match the radius of the circular theme. Each piece is then hand rock-faced and leveled. Within a short time, the natural shade and moisture covered the stone with moss and lichens, adding to the ageless beauty of nature's building blocks. In addition to the plants and stones serving as walls, we also utilized wood to provide partition of spaces in the form of a substantial cedar arbor and a smaller entrance gateway, which echoes the larger structure in design. The small arbor serves to signify the entrance into our garden and entice the audience to explore. A series of walks and steps lead to the large arbor and upper terrace area. Large twin columns provide an entrance into the central entertainment area. The arbor’s details and cosmetic trim are predominantly 90-degree angles with parallel and perpendicular lines giving the structure a substantially heavy appearance as if it were anchored into the hillside. A pair of twin alcove areas built off each side of the main terrace house circular benches built into the arbor. The benches reflect the shape of the stone walls behind them. The intentional weight and massiveness of the elements and materials provide an extreme feeling of safety and comfort when occupying the space inside the arbor. The arbor also serves to display the main focal point of the garden. Viewing into the arbor beyond the twin columns creates a vista with a dual focal point at the back of the terrace.

"Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union."

-Frank Lloyd Wright

Combining Water & Fire

Our original intention was to create an illusion combining fire and water into one unified fixture. This concept evolved into an orchestration between a barbecue grill and a water feature. The water feature consists of five bubbler head fountains turned
The wood work used for the project was rough sawn cedar while landscaping for the garden consists of brick and broken glass sandstone inlays (above). The concrete pool of the water feature acts as a footer to support the weight of the stone wall. The depth of the pool and alcove are designed to amplify the sound of the water and mask the noise from nearby vehicular traffic (below).

horizontally instead of their intended vertical use. The heads are located in sunken voids within the circular wall so that the water appears to originate from inside the wall with no apparent source. The five heads are set into the arc of the wall, which causes the water to converge on one central point in a lower pool. The volume of water, the length of the drop into the pool, the depth of the pool and the amplification from the arched wall all combine to produce enough sound to mask the vehicular noise emanating from the road just behind the garden.

In front of the aqua sculpture hangs a custom designed and fabricated grille. The grille is suspended from an arbor beam, which was designed so that when hung, the grille would appear as a broken extension of the circular wall and reflect the circular stone pattern below. The grille is round to further enforce the theme and the stainless steel cosmetic trim reflects the straight lines of the arbor. Two pieces of six-inch sandstone protrude out from the stone wall on either side of the grille providing shelves for condiments and cooking utensils.

The Final Presentation
All of the greenery (trees, shrubs, perennials, etc.) act as a burnish or blending tool to soften, scale, age, and blend the cornucopia of materials, colors, textures, and design themes into one integral component. Many key areas of the garden are strong
enough to stand alone and be appreciated through sensory absorption. At the same time, all of the pieces of the puzzle work together as a whole due to implementation of basic design principles utilized in the early stages. Not all projects are so involved or pack so much into a small space. This however, is representative of how a small space can contain many components, which still work both functionally and aesthetically. Attention to detail has its rewards.

We are very proud and humbled to state that all of our attention to detail paid off during the judging of our garden as evidenced by the following awards:

- Cleveland Botanical Garden Best of Show—recognizing exceptional design, installation and best overall presentation.
- Massachusetts Horticultural Society Gold Medal Award—One of only eight awards given nationally and presented for the most distinctive landscape.
- Mayor’s Award—determined by peer entrants recognizing outstanding professional landscape design and build.

In addition to these awards received at the show we were also honored with a Judges Special award at the annual Landscape Ohio! Awards Program sponsored by the Ohio Landscapers Association plus a Grand Award and Merit Award at the Ohio Nursery and Landscape Association’s Ohio Environmental Beautification Awards.

Have you heard the phrase, “Don’t sweat the small stuff?” Don’t believe it! It is the small stuff and attention to detail that will turn a mediocre project into a spectacular one. This all begins in the design process. “Every project is a self - portrait of the person who did it. Autograph your work with excellence.”

Frank Lloyd Wright quotes came from “The Masterworks” by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer and David Larkin.

A large arbor covers the upper patio and offers support for the suspended grill feature. The cedar arbor was built by Impallitti Landscaping (above). Brushed stainless steel highlights the trim of the barbecue. To make sure the grill is functional, an insert can be lifted out for cleaning. Duct holes allow rain water to escape while the open top lets smoke blow away (below).